

MERRILL (A.P.)

OBSERVATIONS ON THE USE OF MERCURY.

By A. P. MERRILL, M. D.

REPRINTED FROM THE AMERICAN PRACTITIONER, MAY, 1871.



LOUISVILLE:

John P. Morton and Company, Publishers.

1871.

THE AMERICAN PRACTITIONER.

EDITED BY

DAVID W. YANDELL, M. D.

Professor of Clinical Surgery in the University of Louisville,

AND

THEOPHILUS PARVIN, M. D.

Professor of the Medical and Surgical Diseases of Women in the University of Louisville.

PUBLISHED MONTHLY. TERMS \$3.00 A YEAR.

A journal which stands in the very front rank ; it has something else to do than engaging in unseemly and degrading personal controversy. We take pleasure in commending it to our brethren of the West as an honor to their section of the country, and physicians of the East would do well to have it come monthly to their office tables. It is in every sense of the word a credit to American medical journalism.—*Journal of Psychological Medicine.*

The editorial labor which has been expended on this journal during the year has given the work a standard value, and rendered it one of the most attractive and readable journals now published in this country. The plan of the journal is to give especial prominence to therapeutical studies and applications, thus making it directly contributory to the practical every-day work of the physician. It is a journal which is creditable to the medical literature of the country.—*New York Medical Journal.*

One of the best and most practical medical periodicals in this country.—*Chicago Medical Examiner.*

"The American Practitioner is destined to take at once a high position among its contemporaries."—*Prof. S. D. Gross, M. D.*

"A noble journal, and the very thing needed by the busy doctor."—*Prof. G. C. Blackman, M. D.*

"It has no superior."—*Prof. F. G. Smith, M. D.*

"A most valuable addition to our literature."—*Prof. J. M. DaCosta, M. D.*

"It comes under the most favorable editorial auspices, and under such management must take rank among the best of the medical monthlies."—*The Pharmacist.*

"Of all our exchanges, it is the freshest."—*Nashville Medical Journal.*

"Your Journal is admirable in every way."—*Prof. F. J. Bumstead, M. D.*

JOHN P. MORTON & CO., PUBLISHERS,

LOUISVILLE, KY.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE USE OF MERCURY.

By A. P. MERRILL, M. D.

REPRINTED FROM THE AMERICAN PRACTITIONER, MAY, 1871.



LOUISVILLE:

Printed by John P. Morton and Company.

1871.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE USE OF MERCURY.

Calomel is employed in the treatment of fever and some other diseases for two distinct purposes, as a purgative and as an alterative. In acute diseases a scruple may in general be considered a proper purgative dose, and it may be expected to operate upon the bowels in three or four hours' time. When it fails to do so in recent attacks of fever, castor-oil or some other active purgative may be administered to expedite the movement; but it is an objection to the administration of such adjuvant cathartics with the calomel that by their more rapid action they may carry off a large portion of the calomel through the bowels unchanged. When fever is promptly arrested by abortive treatment, the patient rarely ever requires more than a single dose of calomel, and often not even that; but should the disease be suffered to continue, it is not enough that the bowels be once cleared of ingesta: the excretions poured into them as the result of every returning paroxysm of fever must be gently purged away, or they become inconvenient sources of irritation, and prolong the disease. An idiopathic fever may in this way become symptomatic and difficult of cure. Scruple-doses of calomel are often useful in such cases, operating less frequently and with less exhaustion

of strength than smaller doses. Many southern physicians give calomel in fever only in this way, as a purgative; and if some advantage accrues from the excitation of secretion, it is an incidental benefit to the credit of the mercurial purgative. Much larger doses of calomel have sometimes been given by enthusiastic advocates of the remedy; but it has been proved that, unless unduly retarded in its passage through the bowels, not more than a scruple is appropriated by the action of the organs of digestion, the remainder being mingled with the fecal dejections. If the surplus has performed any office at all, it is probably that alone of the crude mercury, as used in not very ancient times, as a morning aperient, operating perhaps by the power of gravitation.

Opium should not, in my opinion, be given with calomel when used as a purgative, for the reason that its action upon the digestive organs is antagonistic to that of mercury, restraining both secretion and catharsis, and, what is more important, tending strongly to the production of ptyalism and ulceration of the gums. Besides all this, I have found opium exceedingly injurious in the advanced stages of gastric and enteric fever. In gastric or yellow fever, except in the early or irritative stage, its effects are nearly always fatal. As some evidence that this remark is applicable to northern as well as southern fevers, I will state that during the present winter I went to a distant part of New York City to call on a friend. I found him ill with fever of only five days' duration, and with considerable gastric disturbance. He had passed a sleepless night, walking up and down his chamber; but his physicians, two homeopaths, promised to remedy that evil the succeeding night by a soporific dose. They were successful. Their patient slept soundly, and in the morning was supposed to be

better; but at midday he was a corpse. His doctors had not learned one of the great features of gastric fever, and in their zeal for success they had ventured to stray away from infinitesimalism.

Calomel is also used in fever, as in other diseases, as an alterative, a necessity for which is supposed to have been created by the progress of the disease; and then it is almost uniformly given in conjunction with opium, with a view to restrain catharsis, and sometimes to secure ptyalism. Smaller doses, repeated several times a day, are generally given; but much caution is required in conducting this treatment. As long as there is great febrile excitement it is difficult to produce ptyalism; and when such excitement subsides, the action of the mercury upon the gums and salivary glands may become excessive, and lead to troublesome ulcerations. These are the mischievous effects which have brought mercury into discredit with many persons, and given support to systems of charlatantry. My own experience justifies the opinion that equally good results, without danger of purgation or salivation, may be secured by giving the calomel in smaller doses, and without opium. I have generally given preference to half-grain doses, but sometimes have found it expedient to give a full grain. Quite as often, however, I have reduced the dose to a fourth of a grain. The power and efficacy of calomel given in this way can not be appreciated except by those who have tried it. As an occasional aperient dose it is invaluable; and in some forms of chronic disease a half grain of calomel may be taken every night, with benefit, for weeks and months together.

Corrosive sublimate is sometimes to be preferred to calomel as an alterative and aperient, and especially in those

forms of indigestion dependent upon a want of tone in the stomach and bowels, accompanied by a want of healthy action in the liver and kidneys. It is also better suited to the treatment of most catarrhal affections. The medium dose may be set down as one eighth of a grain, which may be given daily with even less danger of salivation than from the use of calomel in half-grain doses, conditioned always upon the exclusion of opium. These two forms of mercury, given in small doses, are, it seems to me, better adapted to the young and the aged than to those in the full vigor of life. The newly-born babe, if it must take medicine at all, is better treated by calomel or corrosive sublimate, in suitable doses, than by the remedies so much relied upon for their reputed mildness of character; and many old people, whose constitutions are well worn by use and abuse, find great relief by the habitual use of calomel or corrosive sublimate in proper quantity.

The use of mercury as a remedial agent is a trite subject upon which to write an essay; but I have made these brief remarks for the purpose mainly of suggesting the important difference between the purgative and the alterative use of mercury, especially in the treatment of fever, and the necessity of avoiding the simultaneous use of opium, if it be an object to prevent ptyalism. I have deemed it proper also to recommend the more general use of corrosive sublimate as the mildest in its medicinal effects of all the forms of mercury, and the least likely to cause salivation. I venture to express a doubt indeed whether the materia medica affords us a milder and safer aperient. I generally give it in form of pills, as solutions are liable to decomposition.

Calomel deserves to be more highly appreciated as a topical remedy, especially in diseases of the dermatoid tissues;

in ulcerations of the mouth, throat, and nasal passages; in purulent ophthalmia and lachrymal fistula; in hemorrhoidal affections and fistula in ano; in excrescences upon the genital organs, sometimes mistaken for syphilitic; in sinuses, fistulas, and ill-conditioned ulcers; in burns, abrasions, and excoriations; in a great variety of cutaneous eruptions; in certain cutaneous excrescences, mostly of the face, often treated by charlatans as cancerous; in encysted tumors, the contents of which have escaped; in surgical operations involving the mucous membranes, the secretions of which interfere with the healing process, etc. Dry calomel is generally to be preferred; but in positions where it can not be easily retained it may be incorporated with castor-oil or with glycerine. Little skill is required in its application superficially; but in fistulas and deep-seated ulcers a quill or tube may be used, from which the powder is extruded by a piston. Salivation is rarely produced by this topical use of calomel, except in ulcers of the throat and nasal passages, whence the remedy reaches the stomach. The quantity of calomel sometimes used topically without the production of ptyalism shows the amount of absorption must be small. In a case of ruptured wen upon the arm of a negress, twenty grains were inserted into the cavity for twenty successive days, and a smaller quantity for several days subsequently; and I have known even more than this used in cases of fistula in ano without evidence of constitutional effects.

Without extending these remarks, I hope I may have succeeded in exciting renewed interest in the uses of mercury, and in giving some hints in regard to its abuses. By occasional discussion it may be hoped indeed that the medical, and to some extent the public, mind may be disabused of

unfounded prejudices against mercury, and made to understand the discriminations to be made between its cathartic and its alterative use. Without such discrimination much that is written, especially on the subject of treating febrile diseases, is unmeaning and unintelligible. As prejudice is overcome, the topical use of calomel may be more generally understood and appreciated; superseding to some extent the troublesome seaton, the painful escharotic, and the reckless and bloody knife.

NEW YORK.

THE AMERICAN PRACTITIONER:

A MONTHLY JOURNAL OF

MEDICINE AND SURGERY.

Terms: Three Dollars a Year, invariably in advance.

The AMERICAN PRACTITIONER is devoted exclusively to Practical Medicine and Surgery, and contains contributions from the leading medical writers of the country.

Its selections are made from original copies, and its reviews aim to extract the practical parts of such works as are noticed.

The editors endeavor to conduct the journal in the exclusive interest of the busy practitioner; while the publishers issue it in the highest style of the typographical art.

As an advertising medium it is unequaled by any medical periodical in the United States.

CONTENTS FOR MAY, 1871.

ORIGINAL COMMUNICATIONS:

Will Quinine Originate Uterine Contractions? By L. A. Sayre, M. D.

Observations on the Use of Mercury. By A. P. Merrill, M. D.

Iodine Inhalations in Diphtheria. By Geo. H. Eyster, M. D.

Sudden Death of an Applicant for Life Insurance. By S. M. Bemiss, M. D.

Foreign Correspondence—From London. By R. O. C.

REVIEWS, CLINIC OF THE MONTH, and NOTES AND QUERIES.

✉ Letters on the business of the journal should be addressed to the publishers,

JOHN P. MORTON & CO.

LOUISVILLE, KY.

✉ All communications, etc., should be addressed to the editors of the AMERICAN PRACTITIONER, care of the publishers.

✉ Every Ms. should bear the name and address of the writer, and should be accompanied by the necessary postage-stamps for its return in case of non-acceptance.

✉ Foreign exchanges, books, etc., should be sent to CHAS. D. CAZENOVE, No. 15 Beaufort Buildings, Strand, London, W. C.

